

## TWO REPORTS ON THE SOUTH

BY GERALD W. JOHNSON

IT IS eight years now since a group of writers centering around Vanderbilt University, at Nashville, Tennessee, published "I'll Take My Stand," a book which many readers promptly construed as a declaration in favor of Mahatma Gandhi for President. It really wasn't that; it was merely the protest of certain gentlemen who had conceived the curious notion that efforts to do away with hookworm, pellagra, and peonage in the Southern States necessarily involved the conversion of the South into a second Pittsburgh. The book was not very effective, and most of those who contributed to it have since shifted their positions somewhat; but it has nevertheless already become a landmark as the beginning of a debate that after eight years seems to be increasing in volume and accelerating in tempo.

It is a great debate, too, and if the Agrarians, as the Nashville group called themselves, actually precipitated it, they rendered to their region a service the value of which can hardly be overestimated. Doubtless it is true that most of the examinations of the South that have appeared since "I'll Take My Stand" were already in the making and would have appeared in some form if that book had never been written; but it is hardly to be denied that the Agrarians have influenced the later writers, if only by compelling them to prune their exuberance, sharpen their definitions, and look more carefully to their logic. In any event, since they published their book the South has become self-conscious to a degree

*A Southerner Discovers the South.* By Jonathan Daniels. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$3.00. *Forty Acres and Steel Mules.* By Herman Clarence Nixon. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. \$2.50.

hardly matched by New England itself; what other region, within the last eight years, has subjected itself to such intense self-scrutiny as is represented by "Preface to Peasantry," "Human Geography of the South," "Southern Regions of the United States," "Divided We Stand," "You Have Seen Their Faces," and "The Attack on Leviathan," to mention a few of the more conspicuous contributions to the debate?

Jonathan Daniels and Herman Clarence Nixon, newcomers to the rostrum, are both reporters rather than polemicists. Each has produced a picture book, but Mr. Nixon got his pictures with a camera, while Mr. Daniels drew his with his typewriter. Mr. Nixon got more facts, but Mr. Daniels had more fun.

Mr. Nixon begins, "This book is a hillbilly's view of the South." Mr. Daniels begins, "We Southerners are, of course, a mythological people." Neither statement, of course, is to be taken literally. Mr. Nixon, in fact, was one of the original Agrarians, a group as far removed from the hillbilly type as any the South can show. Mr. Daniels is a newspaper editor, and if cynics aver that that makes him a professional dealer in mythology, the craft denies it hotly. But they are alike in that each went out to see with his own eyes what these people, from whom each was sprung, are really like, and their accounts, differing widely in manner of presentation, agree so well in essentials that their basic accuracy is established.

The format of "Forty Acres and Steel Mules" invites, and probably was designed to invite, comparison with Erskine Caldwell's "You Have Seen Their Faces." One decision may be made promptly. It is that Margaret Bourke-White is a better photographer than the men of the Division of Information of the Farm Security Administration, who supplied Mr. Nixon's camera shots. But the government men are far from bad, at that; the difference is simply that Margaret Bourke-White is a great artist, while these others are merely clever photographers.

For the rest, the decision depends on what you desire. Mr. Caldwell is more entertaining, and vastly more inaccurate. Mr. Nixon obviously doesn't believe in a personal devil, not even when his name is altered from Satan to Capitalist System. Mr. Nixon is aware that the system is bad, very bad; but he cherishes no delusion that it can be improved by beating up anyone, certainly not the average landlord, who is, in his estimation, taking a terrible beating anyway. He sees exploitation on every side, but he thinks its concentration in the South is due less to the machination of damnyankees than to the overlapping in the region of three classes, farmers, unorganized labor, and Negroes, that notoriously are exploited everywhere. He reiterates again and again that the exploitation goes on "with many Southerners participating in the winnings."

Mr. Daniels reaches roughly the same conclusions, but he approaches it by the way of the journalist, not that of the scientist. He abandoned his editorial chair in the office of the Raleigh, North Carolina, News and Observer one fine day, filled up his car with gasoline, and spent a summer riding all around the South and setting down what he saw. The result is an episodic, disconnected, but astonishingly brilliant book. More than that, regardless of its staccato style, there is a profound coherence in it. Impressionism, while the bane of some people, nevertheless can produce brilliant art, and there are those to whom it conveys more than the most painstaking work of academicians.

It should not be inferred from this that Mr. Nixon is a dullard. On the contrary, he writes admirably always and on occasion eloquently; but he is fundamentally the scientist, while Mr. Daniels is as unscientific as a good reporter always is—and as convincing.

The fact that merits contemplation is that here are two fine books, interesting and frequently beautiful (Mr. Daniels's book, moreover, is punctuated with bursts of uproarious mirth), which tell the same story; and it is as somber a story

as can well be imagined. Allen Tate, Agrarian though he is, came into sharp contact with reality when he spoke of the "nightmare" quality of Southern civilization. Yet the first step in the process of dissipating a nightmare is to recognize it for what it is. That this recognition rapidly spreads in the South needs no further proof than the very existence of the debate that has raged for eight years. To doubt that it has already affected, and will continue to affect, the life of the region, would be to deny the power of intelligence.